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The Weimar Triangle Returns: Prospects for Cooperation between France, Germany, and Poland

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The January meeting of ministers for European affairs of France, Germany, and Poland, and the visit of President Macron in early February 2020 in Warsaw raised hopes for a revival of cooperation within the Weimar Triangle. There are many topics for talks, from relations with the United Kingdom after Brexit, to security policy and joint economic interests. The triangle may gain importance primarily as a forum for consultation and dialogue on contentious issues and to launch economic initiatives.

Created in 1991, the Weimar Triangle, a platform for political cooperation between France, Germany, and Poland, lost much of its earlier significance in the past decade. The last top-ranked official meeting took place in 2011, and since the joint mission of the heads of the respective foreign ministries to Ukraine in 2014, it has been difficult to speak of the emergence of tripartite initiatives of great regional importance. Weimar cooperation was not favoured in political disputes, especially regarding migration issues, as well as the conflict between France and Poland over the cancellation of the sale of Caracal helicopters to the Polish armed forces in 2016.

The meeting of French, German, and Polish EU ministers in Paris in January 2020, as well as the visit of President Macron to Warsaw in early February, revived hope for the reactivation and upgrade of cooperation in the tripartite format. However, the scope of issues that the Triangle can deal with and its possible impact on European policy remains an open issue.

Political Potential. The new institutional situation in the EU after Brexit undoubtedly supports the revival of cooperation in the Weimar format. The exit of the UK at the end of January 2020 has opened more space for political platforms to help accommodate mutual interests and facilitate decision-making. In this context, the Weimar Triangle has considerable potential due to the importance of France, Germany, and Poland in the EU and NATO. The Triangle can also be seen as a political link between the western and eastern parts of the Union, divided by attitudes towards migration, among others.

The Triangle's significance is strengthened by the challenges facing the EU that require deeper cooperation than ever before between the Member States. Europe is losing influence in the world and even its largest countries are unable to achieve their goals alone. Such conclusions result, for example, from the development of the situation in the Middle East and Libya, as well as from the decline in the continent's importance in the world economy and the growing technological gap with respect to the U.S. and China. Closing ranks is also necessary due to intra-EU issues. The current year will be marked by negotiations on future relations with the UK, the financial framework for 2021-2027, and the path to achieving climate neutrality. In each of these areas there is a high risk of disputes between the Member States, so the importance of prior consultation is growing.

Joint Initiatives. The area in which tripartite initiatives are easiest to engage is the economy. France, Germany, and Poland have common interests in protecting free trade in the global economy and strengthening the EU's competitiveness. This results in, for example, the support of these countries for reform of competition policy, expressed on 4 February in a joint letter of Weimer Triangle and Italian ministers of industry to Commissioner Margrethe Vestager. According to the ministers, the EU should support the creation of large European companies (champions) able to compete on the global market.

Another promising area of cooperation is at the intersection of transport, new technologies, and energy, for example, in electromobility, battery production, and the development of railway connections. A positive signal in this context was the granting by the European Commission in mid-January 2020 of financial support for Poland's cooperation with France in the planning of a high-speed rail network. Industrial cooperation could also apply to defence industries, such as the next-generation tank project announced by President Macron during a visit to Poland. Another area of possible cooperation is the introduction of digital taxes and, at a more general level, the fight against tax fraud and evasion. At the World Economic Forum in Davos in January, a Polish initiative was presented to define the tax problem in a way similar to France and Germany.

Triangle of Differences. Despite many reasons for deepening cooperation within the Weimer Triangle, many differences of interest and viewpoint remain a barrier. In this context, the dispute over the rule of law and judicial reform between Poland and the European Commission is of great importance; France and Germany support the EU institution's criticism of the changes in the former. However, the differences at the level of European policy are deeper and concern, for example, the vision of integration. Polish authorities are interested in completion of the common market and continued enlargement of the EU but are very sceptical about deepening integration. A different position is taken by France, which seeks to make the eurozone the political "core" of the EU, extend the scope of majority voting, and at the same time slow down the enlargement process (which was expressed by blocking the opening of accession talks with Western Balkan countries). Germany takes a middle position, focusing primarily on maintaining the unity of the integration and institutional status quo.

Sectoral issues regarding migration, combating climate change, and wage competition—areas where Poland's positions differ from those of Germany and France—may also be a challenge for Triangle cohesion. There is also great potential for disputes in security policy. President Macron questioned U.S. allied credibility and NATO effectiveness. He calls for strengthening Europe's strategic autonomy, both within and outside the EU. Macron also believes that a "new opening" in relations with Russia is necessary, which is partly due to France's prioritisation of Europe's southern neighbourhood and the threat of terrorism. Germany, again, takes a more reserved position: it doesn't share the NATO criticism and, although in favour of dialogue with Russia, is in no hurry to soften the policy course towards this country. The furthest from France's position is Poland, which is striving to significantly strengthen NATO's Eastern Flank and perceives the U.S. as its main ally. Like Germany, it also emphasizes that European defence should be developed in a complementary manner to NATO.

Conclusions. Each party has an interest in reviving cooperation in the Triangle format. France, thinking about the global role of the EU, wants to persuade Poland to its vision of institutional reforms and overcome the crisis in mutual relations. Germany, in turn, is interested in maintaining the unity of the EU, in which the Triangle may prove helpful. This point is also important for Poland, which, moreover, wants greater coordination of economic policy activities and to include its perspective in European security policy.

In the current conditions, the greatest potential for increasing the significance of the Weimer Triangle lies in two areas. The first is consultation regarding the most serious differences of interest and contentious matters. The need for this type of cooperation is particularly evident in security and defence policy, the sphere of relations with Russia and the U.S., as well as institutional reforms in the EU. Agreeing sector initiatives is another area where the Triangle can play an important role. The easiest way to do it is in the economy, for example, in electromobility, infrastructure, energy, and the defence industry.

Given the importance of the Triangle countries to the EU, the cooperation format could become a body formulating ideas and setting the direction for the future of European integration. However, the space to play such a role is limited first of all by the dispute between the Polish authorities and the European Commission over the rule of law and reform of the judiciary. Until that is resolved, it is difficult to expect joint initiatives with France and Germany of strategic importance for the entire Union. Poland's remaining outside the eurozone—the "core" of integration, which will increasingly determine the direction of economic policy in the EU—is also a serious limitation, especially after the departure of the UK. The field of possible arrangements and initiatives between the Triangle countries will, therefore, bypass the banking and fiscal union issues—very important to the evolution of integration—as well as the common budget of the monetary union and the international role of the euro.